DAVID ATLEE PHILLIPS

"Goodbye, Mr. President." "Enjoy Your Retirement, Director."

"Have you ever noticed," asked The Historian, a retired intelligence academic and bibliophile, "how frequently books about CIA directors include 'firing of' in the index?"

Conversation at our weekly lunch of former intelligence officers at Washington's Chez Espionage had turned, as it often does, to recollections about CIA chiefs. The subject arose after The Hawker, who had been a propaganda and psychological warfare expert, had arrived for lunch with a new book about CIA by a British writer. The hefty volume was passed from person to person. Several Chez Espionage regulars thumbed through the index to see if they had been mentioned: comprehensive books about American intelligence published these days usually contain references to past exploits of some of our luncheon group, and includes quotes from others who have been interviewed by the writer. In this instance, the author, in reflecting that many senior American intelligence veterans have an elitist background, quoted the dictum expressed by The Professor, a member of our group who had been an analyst, that "A gentleman is someone who doesn't buy clothes: he has them."

Chez Espionage is the name I use for a Washington restaurant that exists under another name and where a group of aging ex-intelligence operatives meet for lunch once a week. The standard fare on the menu, in addition to food and drink, is what might be described as secret war stories. The recollections of huggermugger derring-do do not stray far from the truth, however, because elaborated versions of espionage history can be challenged by experts. There is an almost literary salon aura at the table when the Chex Espionage regulars arrive and exchange books and magazines they have borrowed from each other and, during the lunch, when they relate tasty morsels of literary-intelligence gossip. The majority of the coterie of former professionals began their service after OSS service and have served under several of the twelve previous directors. The junior recruit in our group recently retired after working for the thirteenth DCI, incumbent William Casey.

The Auditor, who has a near-photographic recollection of CIA people and events, responded to The Historian's observation about DCI's who had retired because of presidential displeasure.

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"Strictly speaking," said the Auditor, "only three of the baker's dozen of DCI'S have been fired. Some have resigned to go on to other government jobs; some have stepped aside for successors from a newly-elected administration."

"How many were actually, uh..." The Colonel, a paramilitary type, hesitated, seeking the proper word.

"How many were *dumped*," interjected The Hill Man, a crusty counterinsurgency veteran dedicated to plain language.

"Three," said The Auditor: "Colby, Helms and Dulles."

Rear Admiral Sidney William Souers, USNR, served as DCI less than six months, before retiring to work in the private sector. Lt. General Hoyt Sanford Vandenberg's first love was military flying; after one year as DCI he retired and became, eventually, Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Rear Admiral Roscoe Henry Hillenkoetter, known affectionately as "Hilly" to those who worked with him, resigned after more than three years to return to the sea off Korea.

General Walter Bedell Smith was DCI from October, 1950, until early 1953. The CIA people who worked for Smith admired him, and called him "Sir!" in his presence and, when he was not around, "Beedle." He left the directorship to move to Foggy Bottom as Under Secretary of State. Eisenhower had been pleased with his wartime chief of staff's performance at the Agency and undoubtedly considered the change in jobs a promotion for his old friend.

"Another reason" observed The Cousin, a Chez Espionage regular who had worked in liaison, "was that Eisenhower wanted Smith's administrative skills over at State because he was queasy about the management abilities of John Foster Dulles. That created a vacancy at CIA."

Allen Welsh Dulles had the longest tenure – February, 1953 until November, 1961 –of any DCI.

"And," said The Historian, "at the end of his term Dulles was the first DCI to regret having to leave his job."

After it was clear in the cruel month of April, 1961, that the Bay of Pigs operation had failed, John F. Kennedy waited over six months before he carried out his decision to ask for Dulles's resignation. He believed Republican critics of his administration would be cautious in expressing strong opinions about the Bay of Pigs fiasco as long as Republican Allen Dulles remained in office.

"Kennedy liked Dulles," said Carlos, who had been an expert on terrorism and Latin America. "Once when one of Kennedy's neighbors from Palm Beach visited Washington after the Bay of Pigs he promised the president he would not see Dulles (even though he was an old friend) because of the Cuban failure. That fair-weather-friend attitude disgusted Kennedy, who promptly invited Dulles to have cocktails with him and their mutual Palm Beach acquaintance."

Several months later President Kennedy was gracious when Allen Dulles, in his first official visit to the CIA building at Langley, escorted Kennedy around. Dulles beamed and his colleagues and friends of so many clandestine campaigns applauded when Kennedy decorated him with the National Security Medal.

The most famous quote about Kennedy's feelings about getting rid of Dulles has become a cliché, and has appeared in many books and articles. Speaking to Richard Bissell, according to one version, Kennedy said, "If this were the British government I would resign, and you, being a senior civil servant, would remain. But is isn't. In our government you and Allen

will have to go, and I will remain."

John Alex McCone was DCI from September, 1961 until April, 1965. "At the time," recalled The Cousin, "McCone said he was going to resign 'because it was time to go back to California.' People remember McCone as the rich California businessman Kennedy summoned to Washington for the DCI job. In fact, Kennedy selected him on impulse while remembering the government jobs McCone had before that – Under Secretary of the Air Force and Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, among other posts. McCone finally decided to go home after the low of dealing with Lyndon Johnson who didn't want to be confused with unwelcome facts following the high of working for Jack Kennedy, who appreciated the blunt truth. It wasn't that McCone and Johnson didn't get along. They just weren't on the same wavelength, professionally or personally; their difference was a difference of *style*."

"I've always heard," said The Hill Man, "that McCone resigned in protest because he was dis-invited to Johnson's famous Tuesday lunches."

"That may have had something to do with his leaving," said The Cousin. "But McCone told me he was delighted to be relieved of the responsibility of attending those lunches. Never learned anything useful, he said, and, anyway, he *never* got any lunch!"

Vice Admiral William Francis Raborn, Jr., was summoned in 1965 from a California retirement golf course to become Lyndon Johnson's DCI. He resigned after a little more than a year to hone anew his handicap. Raborn's departure was quiet, without protest. "Perhaps," commented The Colonel, "Red had heard the insider's story, that later turned out to be accurate, that Lyndon Johnson had assured Richard Helms that Raborn's appointment was an interim one. That after a short stint as Raborn's deputy Helms would move into the largest seventh-floor office at Langley."

Helms was DCI for more than six years. One member of the Chez Espionage luncheon group is called The Journalist, because in retirement she writes on current intelligence developments. She was able to pass on a woman's recollection of the day Richard Helms was fired by Richard Nixon because she had just read *An Ambassador's Wife in Iran*, by Cynthia Helms. The book related the events of 20 November 1972, when Helms came home after a trip to Camp David.

"The President is appointing a new director of Central Intelligence," Helms told his wife.

"Dick described the Camp David interview," wrote Cynthia Helms, "reminding me that President Nixon was never very good at small talk. In a mumbling way the President had noted that, although he had appointed Dick in 1968, the original appointment was by another President, a Democrat."

Helms mentioned that it would be appropriate to leave the Director's job as he was near CIA's customary retirement age of 60, after thirty years of intelligence work. He was bemused when it became apparent Nixon knew little of his long career in intelligence.

Nixon asked Helms if he would be interested in an ambassadorship. At one point he astonished Helms by suggesting that he might become U.S. envoy to the Soviet Union.

"Helms to Moscow!" The Skeptic, the Chez Espionage regular who had been in counterintelligence, was aghast.

Helms, too, had been astonished at the suggestion when it was made. He explained to Nixon why the assignment of an ex-CIA chief as ambassador to the Soviet Union

might be an impolitic one, and that for a number of reasons Iran would be a more suitable appointment.

When Richard Nixon was elected in 1968 Helms had not submitted his resignation, as many politically-appointed senior government officials had. His Deputy, General Vernon Walters, was prepared to do so but was dissuaded by Helms, who explained that it was an Agency tradition to overlook that political nicety. Helms said he did not wish to categorize CIA's two top jobs as political posts.

Helms, years later, discussed the Camp David meeting with the British writer of the new CIA book. "I had not been given any warning that I was scheduled to leave," he said. "I don't have any doubts that Nixon all along in the back of his mind had a time for how long I was going to be there. After all, I was not his personal friend and he owed me no political favor or anything like that, so I always thought he would change me at some point. I just didn't realize it was going to be at that point."

Helms had gone to Camp David after a briefing on the budget, believing President Nixon planned that subject as an agenda item. He was surprised when he learned that he was being "Dumped," reiterated The Hill Man.

The ex-operatives at Chez Espionage engaged in a lively discussion about Richard Nixon's possible motivations for relieving Helms from the nation's top intelligence post. A number of reasons that might have influenced Nixon one way or another were suggested, but it didn't take long to find consensus. The explanation was simple: It was Watergate.

"Dick Helms paid the price for that 'No.'...", William Colby was to write in his autobiography. "What happened at Camp David had nothing to do with the budget. It had to do with Helms's careful distancing of the Agency from Watergate, his refusal to allow it to be used in the coverup. And for that Nixon fired him as DCI, sent him packing to Iran as ambassador, and named James Schlesinger as the Agency's new chief."

James R. Schlesinger served only briefly as DCI.

"Less than a year?" guessed Carlos.

"Four months," said The Auditor, "and twenty-six days."

After Schlesinger became Secretary of Defense, William E. Colby began what was to be a stormy tour of three years and four months. His legacy at the Agency was the "skeletons," the "family jewels," the collection of questionable past CIA activities that Colby was later to identify as "bad secrets." The notorious list of misdeeds was Schlesinger's idea, but Colby compiled it.

Colby had made a cold calculation: even the appearance of anything approaching stone-walling to the ferocious questioning of Congressional committees during 1975 could lead to the destruction of CIA as an institution. Whether he was right or wrong continues to be a subject of controversy. Among those who thought that Colby went too far, was too open, was the occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Colby returned to Washington in the early morning hours of 2 November 1975, to receive word that President Gerald Ford wanted to see him at the White House the next morning at 8 a.m.

On *Sunday* morning?

"Colby decided the early morning levee had to be about leaks," The Skeptic said. "On that Saturday there had been a serious leak to the press, probably from the House Intelligence Committee, that the CIA had been covertly supporting Kurdish rebels.

He expected to find an interagency group waiting at the White House to discuss how such leaks could be prevented."

Instead of an interagency group, Colby found only John Marsh, Counselor to the President. He escorted the DCI into the Oval Office.

Later, Colby was to recall the meeting. "Ford was seated behind the huge, handsome Presidential desk, looking a bit grim and, as he was to fly to Florida to meet with Sadat later in the morning, he had a thick black briefing book on the Middle East situation in front of him. He set it aside as soon as Marsh and I walked in. I had seen the President regularly in the past year, but ours could not in any way be characterized as a personal relationship. Ford, while always cordial, dealt with me in a fairly formal manner. He did not stand up now; we didn't shake hands. I said, 'Good morning, Mr. President,' Jack said you wanted to see me."

"Yes," the President replied, gesturing toward a chair where he invited Colby to sit. "We are going to do some reorganizing of the national security structure."

Now, the Chez Espionage group discussed President Ford's motives for firing Colby. It was recognized his dismissal was a part of a larger reorganization (Schlesinger was fired from his Pentagon post, too) but no one questioned the conventional wisdom that Ford and others in his administration had revealed too much to the press and to congressional investigating committees.

"And so he was given his walking papers," observed The Colonel.

"He was *dumped*," insisted The Hill Man. (The Hill Man's plain talk is sometimes irritating to other regulars at Chez Espionage. They refer to themselves as mature ex-operatives, sometimes as senior citizens, but The Hill Man always calls them "old geezers." Even worse, he refers to one of our group as former chief of station, Babylon).

"Did you know," asked The Journalist, "that Ford offered Colby an ambassadorship, as Nixon did Helms, but Colby turned it down?"

"Yes," said Carlos, "as Ambassador to NATO!"

"Almost as bad an idea," said the Colonel, "as an ex-DCI going to Moscow."

George Herbert Walker Bush was the DCI for one year, providing salve to wounded and depressed CIA patients, before he moved aside after Jimmy Carter was elected. In early 1977 Stansfield Turner became DCI, remaining in the post for almost four years. There was little balm for CIA people in Turner's CIA Gilead. Whatever faint hope Turner might have had that he could weather a change of administration was dashed when Ronald Reagan, before his inauguration, announced there would be a new Republican DCI.

"What about Casey?" asked The Journalist. "Will he resign, or be kicked out before Reagan leaves office?"

All turned to the new man, the one who had worked for Casey.

"He might resign for personal reasons," the newcomer said, "but his health is excellent now. I doubt very seriously he would quit for any other reason. He's thriving on the job."

"And," added The Hill Man, "there is no way Reagan will *dump* him."

The Journalist agreed: "Having gotten this far down the road, bumpy spots and all, there is simply no way Reagan would get rid of Casey now."

The entire Chez Espionage crew expressed total agreement.

ENDNOTE

The reader will have noted a blatant use of literary license, but the opinions of the Chez Espionage regulars are faithful reflections of the thoughts expressed by my friends and former colleagues at a weekly luncheon in Washington. Additionally, several veterans who worked closely with CIA chiefs were interviewed for this article. The book mentioned in the second paragraph is by John Ranelagh, *The Agency: The Rise and Decline of the CIA*, Simon and Schuster, 1986. The anecdote about Allen Dulles's fair-weather friend from Palm Beach can be found in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House*, Houghton Mifflin, 1965. The paragraphs about the DCI tenure of John McCone came from an interview with a man who worked closely with McCone. The direct quote from Richard Helms is from the Ranelagh (pronounced Ran-lee) book. The quotes from William E. Colby are from *Honorable Men: My Life in the CIA*, Simon and Schuster, 1978.